

March 4, 2011
Bozena Page
Bristol, Connecticut

Re: Bill HB6380 Human Services Committee

I am writing to state my opposition to HB6380 and SB1012, bills which would consolidate the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) into the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services (DDS).

This consolidation effort will not save money in the long run because BESB is vital to the education of a blind student, and if they do not get educated properly it will trigger due process cases. The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, or BESB, has been around for over a hundred years and losing them will diminish the future prospects for blind and visually impaired people in Connecticut. What this agency offers cannot be simulated through the educational system and I know that first hand.

When my daughter entered first grade the itinerant Braille teacher suddenly retired and my daughter had no one to teach her braille. The school system could not find a replacement and subsequently my daughter was not learning to read and write. I ended up having my daughter repeat the first grade because one whole year was wasted.

If it weren't for BESE directing and managing my daughter's education, my daughter would be illiterate. The school system does not have the expertise to educate blind children. When my daughter graduated from the 8th grade in the Bristol school system, she didn't even know how to give change back for an item costing 50 cents from one dollar. When I brought this up at a PPT meeting, the teachers just stared at me blankly. As much as BESB does, if the school system doesn't follow through then it's as good as doing nothing. I was so disgusted with the results of my daughter's education at the end of 8th grade that I packed up and went to Florida for a year to have her attend the Florida School for the Blind to repeat the 8th grade in an attempt to catch up. The results were amazing but much work is still needed. Being in a competent environment changed my daughter's attitude and capability for learning because she was expected to succeed. When she came back to the Bristol school system over a year later, I was repeatedly told how mature my daughter has become. She even started walking on her own using a four-pronged cane to support her. She has cerebral palsy that keeps her from walking independently.

The school system didn't have faith in her progress but I didn't give up as easily. Blind people have been known to take longer to learn simple concepts that a sighted person would not have a problem with. 80 percent of what we learn comes through our vision. Blind students learn through repetition of experience, where a sighted person gets constant reinforcement of a concept visually naturally in their environment.

BESB knows this and they teach educators how to teach a blind person. What they provide to the blind population makes the difference between living a full life and becoming a shut-in. It's not just about children either. Older folks who become blind depend on BESB to learn skills to adjust. People with

diabetes are in danger of becoming blind. The number one injury in the present war is head injuries and many soldiers are becoming blind. They can't depend on the VA to help them and they will require skilled help in mobility and life skills to help these soldiers adjust.

Here's what a friend of mine has to say after losing her sister to suicide this past year who lost her vision caused by diabetes when she was 17. She was only in her forties.:

"Mary lost her sight at 17 and never ever really handled it well. She used to say it was harder for her (she thought) to be able to see for 17 years and then go totally blind. Mary was a very outgoing happy kid until then and her world just became so dependent on everyone else and she hated that. She used to be so upset waiting for people to ask her places because she never liked always having to ask for rides and people to read her mail etc.

Mary always thought everyone else was having fun in life but her. She did have great times but she never could handle all the sickness and despair. Every year she would lose a new function due to the diabetes and it did send her into bouts of depression. She tried to end her life three times but is Christian and thought she would go to hell so somehow never went all the way through with it. I think you must try to make them understand that anything that takes away a blind person's ability to be as independent as possible is just cruel. "

I don't know how the State thinks it will save money by closing down BESB. For kids who grow up blind and don't get the services they need to become productive citizens will eventually end up on welfare line instead. How does that solve a budget problem? My daughter is 18 and has been a part of a work program through BESB to help her get ready to work. Without such programs she has no more options. If she doesn't get educated in Braille and life skills how does she go to college? My daughter is in her third year of high school and she's at the stage where she needs BESB more than ever to help her transition into an adult working world.

The school system has been negligent with her for the past 13 years and now that we are at this critical stage in her development losing BESB can destroy her future. My daughter has been slowly catching up academically since she's been in high school. Now that she's older it's been very important for her to utilize what BESB offers in way of camps, and skills days and technology training just to name a few. BESB exposes her to things she would otherwise not be exposed to, and being around the other blind students at BESB trainings builds her confidence.

When I had my daughter repeat the 8th grade in 2007 I first consulted an attorney because I wanted to sue the educational system for not giving my daughter a proper education. I made the decision not to because I didn't want my daughter's education delayed any longer and instead tried something new, attending a school for the blind, and it was a good choice because the changes in my daughter proved how intelligent she truly is and what she is capable of. However, if we lose BESE and my daughter is denied brailled school work and equipment and support, etc., I will have no choice but to follow through with my due process rights because there will be no chance of her every "catching up." As of

this week I have already begun preparation in case things go in that direction. I have been patient but this is more than I can bare. I've worked hard with my daughter to help her become the best person she can be, but without help from agencies like BESB, there is no hope.

I respectfully request that you do not pass such a bill that will ruin people's chances of having a better life. It's un-American and immoral. The educational system is not equipped to handle the blind student and neither the educational system nor DSS is capable of handling all the needs based on the specialized skills required to assist a person who is blind from teaching them how to use a cane and walk in traffic to reading Braille and knowing what is available to them in equipment to having access to their transcription services and library. One school text book can produce 8 volumes of braille books that are about 3" wide. Who's going to pay for that space? Who's going to provide Brailling machines and service them when they break? Who's going to advocate for blind people to make jobs for them? Without skills, a blind person has little chance of sustaining a normal life and will have to depend on the State to help them out.

Cutting this agency to save money is truly a short sighted prospect.

Sincerely,

Bozena and Bryan Page
Bristol, CT



Alexi Page, Age 18, Born Blind
Junior in High School